

Good Vibrations: Sonic Responses to Human Engagement

Feel the Sound, Barbican

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In his 1962 short story “The Singing Statues”, J.G. Ballard imagined an electronic future for sculpture, in which sonic statues containing “senso-cells” are animated by the vibrations around them. Such a vision, of “an incredible sequence of grunting, clanking, barking and twanging sculptures”, responding to human presence, is realized in *Feel the Sound* at the Barbican, an immersive, multi-sensory show which aims to “expand the potential of listening beyond hearing”. But whereas in Ballard such works are the preserve of the rich, and are cynically manipulated by creators and gallerists to hold a mirror up to collectors’ vanity, the Barbican presents an altogether more egalitarian vision: exhibits respond uniquely to visitors’ engagement, and a central concern is to provide sonic refuge in unstable times.

Throughout the show visitors are in dialogue with artworks. We are invited not merely to listen and to look but to touch, tilt, squeeze, sit, sing, pose and dance. The emphasis is on what sound can do. *Your Inner Symphony*, a collaboration between Kinda Studios, the world’s first women-led neuroscience studio, and the design studio Nexus, invites us at the start and at stations across the exhibition to scan our hands and have our changing physiological reactions converted into pulsing, psychedelic graphics. *Resonant Frequencies*, by the Spirit-led artist Evan Ifekoya, then exposes us to frequencies believed to have healing effects, which we can not only hear but feel on a vibrating bench, and see travelling through a pool of water.

An “Embodied Listening Playground” extends this sense of sound as physical presence. Stepping onto Jan St. Warner’s *Vibraceptional Plate* distributes the low-frequency vibrations travelling through our bodies across the metal platform, so that they become externalized and re-internalised at the same time in a sense-enhancing loop that strangely removes us from the usual workings of space and time. Reaching up into the air activates the hanging cloth udders of Amor Muñoz’s *Chimera, Expanded Bodies*, a “hybrid, posthuman entity”. Our bodily rhythms – of heartbeat, pulse, circulation, and respiration – are transported from this “textile-tactile nervous system” into pods containing non-human organisms, resulting in metabolic processes which trigger the striking of chimes. The clinks and jangles that result are thus a duet, breaking down boundaries between the human and the non-human.

Visitors’ bodies are central to the whole show, mostly interacting with different forms of abstraction, but in two representational works there is mirroring in the form of human simulacra. In the video *Jolene (Feat. Holly+)*, the artist Holly Herndon’s AI double performs a version of Dolly Parton’s hit against a backdrop of unstable barnyard imagery. Holly+ is a deepfake tool, allowing others to perform in the artist’s voice; the

video's strange glitches and distortions lay bare the artifice, but the immaculate vocals make clear the risk AI poses to authorship and to human creativity at large, and the song's mournful pleas against theft take a different turn.

Resonance Continuum, by the transmedia collective Elsewhere in India, consists of a large screen filled by a temple-like structure displaying ancient South Asian imagery and gateways which open when we participate in a thousand-year-old Sindh tradition of ringing a cowbell, representative of “the universe’s foundational rhythm”. Masked humanoid automata step forward, standing in for “the sentient beings who brought music to India millennia ago”, and we are directed to assume dance poses. If our poses are correct, the beings will copy us, and Indian music will play; if we fail, the music stops and the beings retreat behind their gates. Are we leading them or they us? Whether we attempt to partake in this reinvention of ancient cultural traditions is entirely down to our individual choice; and perhaps that forms part of the stated aim of producing a “decolonized, hopeful vision of the future”.

Cultural preservation through innovation plays a part too in works in a “Sonic Machines Playground”. Alejandra Cárdenas and Tatiana Heuman’s *Near and Remote Memory Activation Practices* takes traditional South American forms of sound production including whistling bottles, presenting these as “living and evolving entities” through the use of a hydraulic airflow system; as we tilt a seesaw and press pedals, gentle wheezes and whispers emerge from the instruments’ mouths. Ei Wada’s *Electric Fan Harp* transforms old household fans into electromagnetic instruments. We become their performers by shining torches at them; the light we shine passes through fitted perforated discs in different configurations and at different speeds, and is then converted into electric signals which produce an eerie warbling. The goal is the creation of “a form of urban folk music”.

If there’s a risk that some of these abstract works might elicit the response of Ballard’s wealthy patron – “it’s all very clever, but a bit of a headache” – then two installations which follow provide a soothing return to more traditional harmonies. *UN/BOUND* stages a holographic choral performance by Trans Voices, the UK’s first trans+ vocal collective. The artist and producer ILĀ and the Berlin-based sound studio monom have designed a spatial listening experience, in which we can feel the presence of the different performers even in their absence as we move around a hall. Microphones invite us to join in, in response to lighting cues. The a cappella style is part Hildegard von Bingen, part contemporary folk, timeless and transcendent, representing an unbodied freedom.

In *Forever Frequencies*, created by Barcelona-based design collective Domestic Data Streamers, responses to questions about memories, music, and dreams are translated by large language models into rhythms, pitches and durations to create unique compositions, “songs for a memory or a moment that hasn’t happened yet”.

Visitors can commission their own composition while those produced for several creatives play on mechanical music box movements. Max Cooper's memories of Glastonbury and dreams of Jackson Pollock produce harmonies spanning several octaves in the Lydian mode; while Suzanne Ciani's memories of Boston Symphony Hall and dreams of a spatial symphony rather more surprisingly produce a single-line melody in C major spanning just an octave. The collective is responsibly precise about the giving up of control to machines: like an updating of John Cage's publication of the questions he would ask the I Ching, the coding used is displayed on the wall. The project is true to the collective's commitment to "fighting indifference towards data" and to building change through the positive use of AI in collaboration with communities.

From these intimate distillations of thought we are transported into the dimly-lit dystopian realm of the Barbican's underground car park, where traffic signage becomes confused with gallery directions. Confusion of categories is the point: words, sounds, images and our shadows collide in Max Cooper's own work for the show, *Reflections of Being*. The electronic music and projections onto hangings are the result of the responses of his community of listeners to the question "What do you want to express that you feel you can't in everyday life?". As we wander in and out of the hangings, we interrupt the projections, ourselves uncertainly becoming interruptions or focal points in shadow or silhouette.

Round a corner we encounter *Joyride* by Temporary Pleasure, four backed-up salvaged cars, each pimped up with a sound system blaring out a different style of club music in turn, accompanied by rave lighting. On the first encounter they appear locked in a contest, a paragone for the Y2K era. Yet each style is in fact a unique hybrid, produced by DIY collectives and genre-defying artists. The Tokyo Tuner plays eclectic beats from Japan's underground scene; The Latin Lowrider fuses South American club music with traditional rhythms; The Bimma mixes contemporary Caribbean sounds, from dancehall to bashment; and The Boy Racer distorts UK garage with donk and internet remixes, the vision of the artist Corbin Shaw, whose work seeks to dismantle toxic masculinity, as in his St George's Crosses bearing slogans such as "Soften Up Hard Lad". The sense of a hard-edged antagonism is softened, so that when all four sound systems play together, it becomes more a display of unity than rivalry between subcultures, and even Car Park 5 seems to become a warmer space. For a show so interested in technology and the more-than-human, *Feel the Sound* has a very human heart.